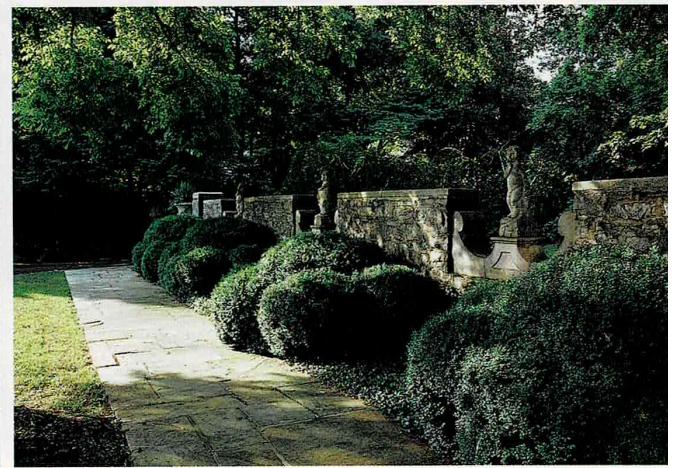
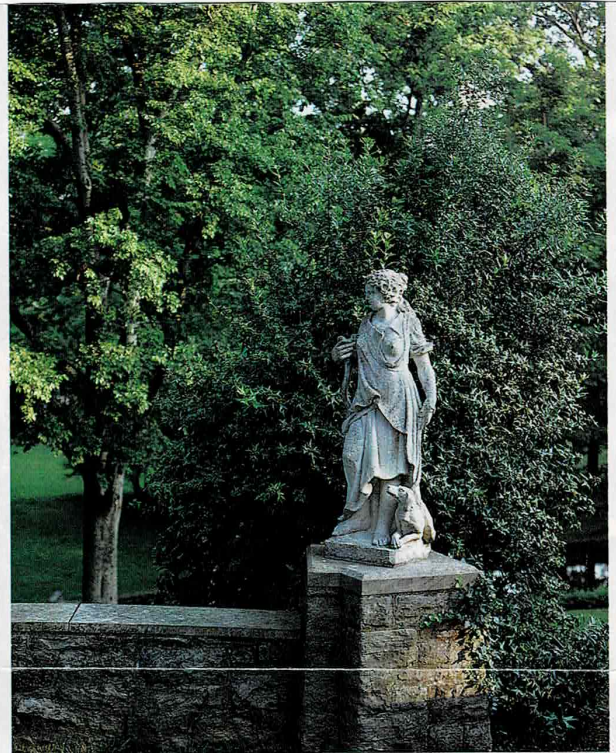
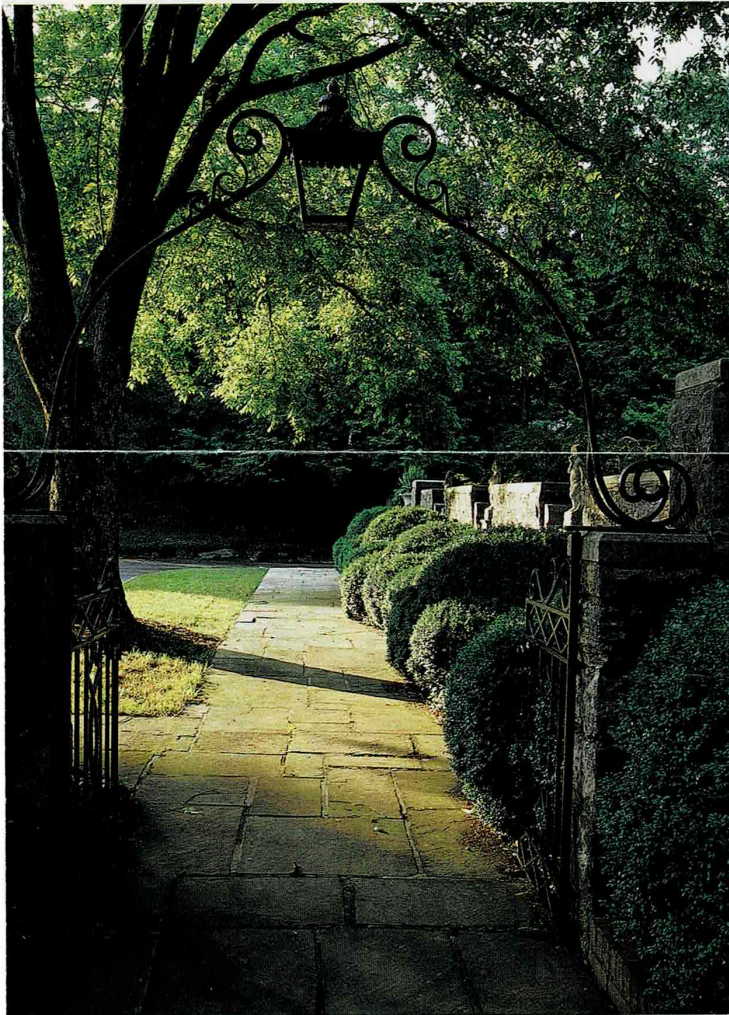


GARDENING



Paradise Restored

Some detective work uncovers a lush Nashville garden created by one of the 20th century's great landscape designers, Bryant Fleming

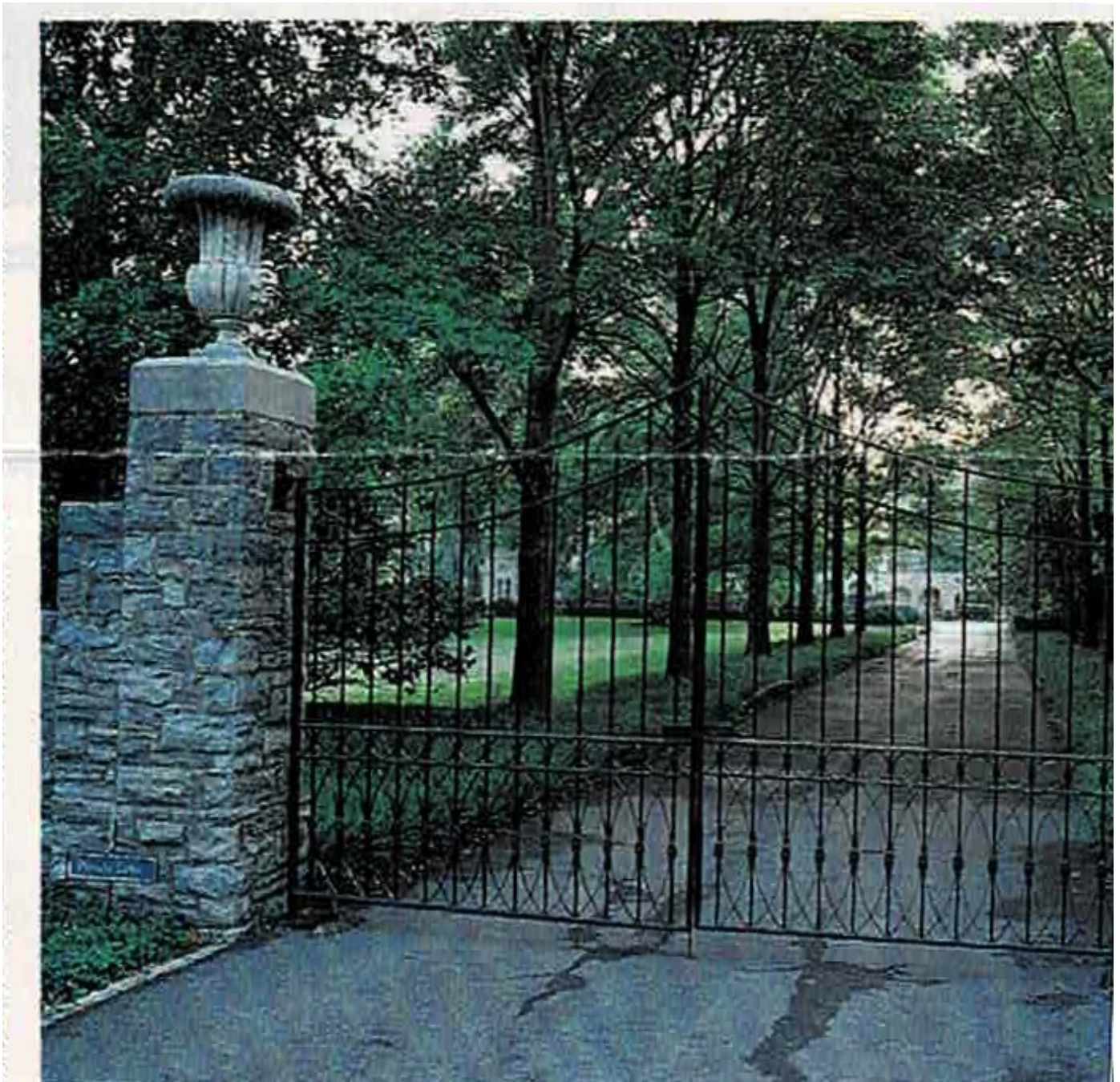
by Donna Dorian Wall Photographs by J. Paul Moore

When members of the Nashville landscape design firm Acanthus were asked to tidy up the grounds of an original estate in the Belle Meade community, designers Robin Schutte

and Charlotte Terrell arrived expecting no more than a few days' work. But after their labors exposed the remnants of an old path and a rustic grotto embedded in the rocks, they

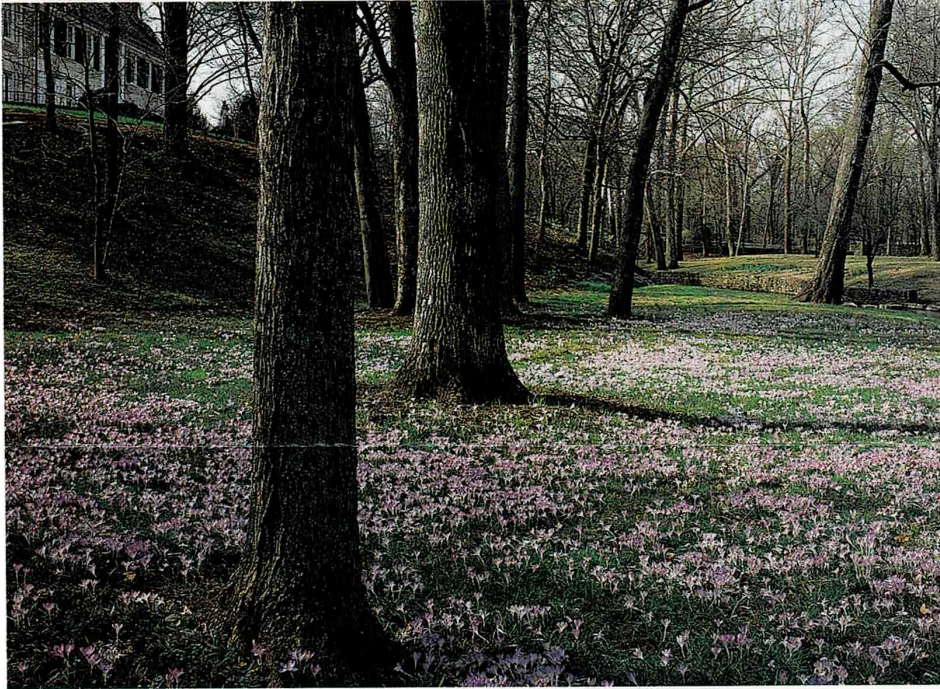
were encouraged to cut away more overgrowth. As they continued to uncover the original elements of the Watersmeet grounds, what came to light was a Country Place Era garden

Landscape architect Bryant Fleming frequently featured massive stone walls in his garden designs of the 1920s and '30s. At Nashville's Watersmeet, the scalloped stone wall that he inset with statuary provides privacy to the lawns and gardens behind it. The terrace area, top right, gives way to the lawn and the hillside walk down to the creek.





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Naturalized heirloom crocuses, left, sweep across a bank along a creek in early spring. The iron gates at Watersmeet, below, open to an elm-lined drive that makes a dramatic L-shaped turn toward the house. A grotto, bottom left, has a rustic design in keeping with the natural look and native plant population of Watersmeet's original woodland garden.



designed by Bryant Fleming.

Like many Nashvillians, Schutte and Terrell were familiar with Fleming's reputation as the designer of the Cheekwood estate, now the home of Nashville's Botanical Gardens and Museum of Art. Since the grounds and the Georgian-style mansion were in the process of being restored, Cheekwood—and Fleming himself—

had become the talk of the town. So with their interest piqued, Schutte and Terrell kept working at Watersmeet, digging deeper into Fleming's history.

Fleming, they discovered, had come of age in the generation immediately following Frederick Law Olmsted, the father of American landscape design and the proponent of a natural landscape, exemplified

by his part in the design of New York's Central Park. As a young man, Fleming had written Olmsted for career advice. Olmsted's reply led Fleming to Cornell University, where he became one of the first students of landscape architecture and later the head of Cornell's department. With the coming of the new age of landscape design, Fleming, like contemporaries Ellen Biddle Shipman and Beatrix Farrand, became as adept a designer of landscapes as he was of architecture and interior décor. By the time he arrived in Nashville in the late 1920s, Fleming had worked on some of the most prominent estates in the country and had designed landscapes for the likes of Andrew Carnegie and William E. Scripps.

With Fleming's completion of Cheekwood, his reputation spread fast in the burgeoning affluent community of Belle Meade. It wasn't long before C. Runcie Clements and his wife turned to him to landscape the home they planned to build on the

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6-acre site they had purchased from Belle Meade Plantation.

Working with the house's architect, A. Herbert Rodgers, Fleming developed a cohesive scheme that intimately related the mansion, sited at the top of a bluff, to the grounds. An elm allée plotted a dramatic approach to the entrance of the L-shaped house, where a reflecting pool became the center of a rectangular turnaround. Fleming built a scalloped stone wall inset with statuary on one side of the turnaround, which enclosed the drive as if it were a foyer to the gardens.

Mrs. Clements and her staff of full-time gardeners tended to a multitude of gardens, including a collection of formal tulip beds built into the stone patios directly off the house. But as the flat grounds gave way to sloping





bluff, Fleming's architectonic design and classical gardens softened into a natural, woodland landscape.

Terracing the bluff, Fleming carved out a walkway that encircled the house partially down the hill, where he set in place the stone path and grotto. During the mid-1970s, Nashville-based landscape architect Ben Page began the first restoration of the grounds and found the remnants of Mrs. Clements' wildflower garden. Schutte and Terrell replanted the area with hellebores, creeping phlox, ferns, daylilies, narcissus, and the firm's signature plant. With the grotto's rediscovery, the woodland scene seems vital and fanciful again.

Even into the 1970s, long after the Garden Club of America placed the grounds on its tour of distinguished gardens and photographed them for its archives; Watersmeet—whose name refers to the meeting of two creeks at the bottom of the hill—was frequently cited as one of the finest gardens of the South.

In spring, naturalized crocuses still bloom in the calm greensward of Watersmeet, creating a dazzling blue mist famous among Nashvillians as a harbinger of spring. The statuary and ironwork are again in good repair. And so the handiwork of Bryant Fleming dazzles once again. ♦

For details, see Sourcebook.

The reflection pool at the front of Watersmeet exemplifies how landscape architect Bryant Fleming unified the house and its garden into a cohesive scheme. Most of the original statuary and garden ornaments, as well as the house's window gratings are still intact and date back to the early 1930s.

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